

Untold Italy Episode 194: Lovely Lecce - Italy's Southern Beaut

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 194.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Buogiorno Ciao friends. Welcome to your weekly virtual trip to Italy and one where we are headed back to beautiful Puglia - the region found in the south eastern corner of Italy's boot. We are resuming our usual programming now and I'm so excited that you're going to find out all about Lecce - a gorgeous baroque city that is sometimes called the Florence of the south.

I'm not sure why though because Lecce has a unique and fascinating character and charm all of its own and best of all it's a city that has layers that unfold before your very eyes, from Roman ruins to elegant palazzi and beautiful gardens. And speaking of layers, one of the specialty foods of the city is a very delicious flaky pastry called a Rustico Leccese which is filled with bechamel sauce and tomato.

But I digress, today we're welcoming our friend Paulo back onto the show to tell us all about his home town. Paulo has been on the show a couple of times now and we always enjoy his passion and insight into the wonders of Puglia.

Katy

Bentornato Paolo. Ciao, and welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Paolo

Ciao, everybody.

Katy

It's so good to have you back on the show. It's been too long.

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Paolo

Yes, I'm so excited. So excited.

Katy

It's so great. So now, Paolo, we know each other pretty well, but some of our listeners - we get new ones all the time - they might be meeting you for the first time. So could you please tell them all a little bit about yourself and what you do?

Paolo

Okay. I am Paolo. Paolone for all my friends because I'm one of the tallest person in town. I was born in Lecce, raised in Lecce, went to university in Lecce, where I studied preservation of the cultural heritage, as we say. So since the beginning of 2000, I've tried to promote my area, especially Lecce, because of the architecture. And now what I do is basically I'm a tour guide all over the region, and I'm based in Matera, but I still come back to Lecce as often as I can.

Katy

It's such a beautiful, beautiful city. Now, Paolo, I've noticed Puglia is deservedly getting a lot more attention from particularly English-speaking travelers these days. What's happening there? Why is it so exciting in Puglia? Why does everyone want to come?

Paolo

My feeling is that people come to Puglia when they know already about Italy, and they're looking for a place that is still more authentic, like a little bit away from the big tour destination where everybody go, because in Puglia it's quite big, so offers the possibility to get mixed with the locals. I think that what people is looking is actually authentic experiences when they can have a chance to be in touch with the real local people and not just like everything prepared for tourism. This is my feeling.

Katy

I think you're right, and I think what we were saying before, just before we jumped on the recording, is that it's really great to see so many responsible tourism initiatives and people taking responsible tourism very seriously in Puglia. So you do retain that authenticity, I guess.

Paolo

Absolutely. For instance, a lot of the best hotels in the area are all the historical buildings, like all the farmhouses, as Matera, as we say, all restored, more than renovated, with extremely good taste and care. So the materials, the style, so when you go there, you feel that everything has a charm as a history. It's not just like an accommodation and also another curiosity you can't build in Puglia, taller than an olive tree in a countryside, there's a restriction. So, yes, there's other places where tourism in the 80s has destroyed the environment a little bit. We don't have huge buildings, like along the coast, like you can see in other areas.

Katy

I didn't know that about the olive tree. And for anyone who's listening and they're thinking "Hmmm I didn't think olive trees are that big"... but in Puglia, they have very special olive trees, very ancient ones that.

Paolo

Are quite yes, yes. A thousand years old ones.

Katy

Very, very special trees. Okay, so, I mean, we know Puglia is just amazing, but Lecce is a very special place in Puglia, and it's one of the most important and probably the most beautiful city there, I think. And so why don't you tell everyone about Lecce, where it is and why it's such an important city in Puglia.

Paolo

Okay, first of all, you should all forget me because I'm from Lecce. So I think that Lecce is the best place in the world. So I'm not really objective when I talk about Lecce and I know every single stone there. So it's really a place that I like. One of the main reason that I like it is that everything or pretty much everything belongs to a specific moment of the history that goes essentially from the half of the 1500s till the half of the 1700s. In one word, Baroque. Baroque architecture is crazy. Like, we don't have any more straight streets, for instance. So when you are standing at the beginning of a street, you can see the buildings, like sticking out, popping out from the side, like waving at you because the buildings wants to be seen from you walking. So the facade is never aligned one with another, but they are angled to be seen by people that walk along the streets. The corners, for instance, sometimes stick out

where you can see the column and the coat of arms of the families angled to be seen by different point of views.

Paolo

The balconies are extremely decorated because people in the past wanted to be up above and be noticed by all the walkers. There's a lot of illusions. Buildings that looks massive. Then you turn around the corner and it's just a great facade and nothing at the back. Crazy decorations. There's a lot of churches and buildings with so many details and angels and fruit and plants. It's really like a surprise at every corner. You turn around and you - boom. You see something that you never expect. It's really like a great place to get lost and discover so many little details.

Katy

Yeah, I totally agree. And you get that feeling as soon as you arrive because the city gates are so magnificent, aren't they?

Paolo

Yeah. Also because consider that, Lecce was the old town only till the 20s. There's a massive difference between the architecture that you have into the gates and outside. So what's outside is basically the majority from the 50s, 60s, 70s and then you go through the arches, through the gates, and you jump back in the past and everything changes the color of the stone, which is like pale yellow. There's no asphalt anymore because it's been removed. So it's like the original cobblestones. It's really like a changing completely scenario.

Katy

It's absolutely a beautiful place. And then you have all these trees sticking up. And when I was there, it was in June and there were so many flowers exploding everywhere. It's a very elegant city, I think, even though you're describing it as a bit crazy, but it's crazy in an elegant way.

Paolo

There's places in Italy where the architecture, for instance, of the 1800, is very ordered, so everything is aligned, precise, classic. I would say in Lecce, the architecture it's more like a

surprise with the decorations, with little faces all over. In that sense. Not crazy in a bad way. Yeah, it is elegant in a sense. Yeah.

Katy

Definitely. I love how you were walking around and you can peek into little courtyards in the buildings and in some palazzi, and there's like a little fountain.

Paolo

I always suggest people to do it. I shouldn't, but when it's not too bad, sneak in and have a look inside of the building is always the possibility of seeing something completely different, because every building has a secret garden at the back. So sometimes sneaking in or just having a look into the courtyards allows you to see these amazing gardens. And if someone of you wants to come the last Sunday of May, it's like 23 or 27, I can't recall families, old families, that for a special event, open their buildings. There's music, there's flower decorations, and you have a map, and you can enter these beautiful gardens that are usually just secret, just kept for their own.

Katy

Absolutely wonderful. So for everyone that doesn't know Puglia, because we were talking about the heel of the boot, and Lecce is kind of down near the bottom, right?

Paolo

Yes. It's a very historically or strategically unlucky location because it's away from everything. And this is a good thing for us now, because people that come really need - like they want to come. You don't pass by Lecce. You have to plan, visit Lecce and get there.

Paolo

And the importance is also due to the position, because if you look on the map, we are in a peninsula, and Lecce is in the narrowest part of this peninsula. So was used as a place to be in control of the entire peninsula from a huge enemy that was the Ottoman Empire. So along the coast, there's a lot of watchtowers, and they're all in communication among each other. But they also can send a message to the main tower of Lecce, which is the bell tower of the cathedral. From the top of it, you can see the Ionian side and the Adriatic side, because it's done with this specific purpose, and it's the reason why Lecce is such a unique place. Even in

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Puglia. Like, there's not other places like Lecce in Puglia because it's been created as a place for defense.

Katy

Did the Ottoman Empire ever - were they ever successful in invading, or were the Puglese so clever they kept them out with all the watchtowers?

Paolo

No, we're not that clever, but we had an episode in 1480 when the Ottomans attacked and conquered Otranto, which is the furthestmost east village of Italy, and they killed so many people they killed also a lot of kids. In the Church of Otranto, there is a chapel with all the bones of these people that for the Church, are martyrs because they sacrificed their lives not to convert to Muslim. That episode shocked not only the area, but the entire Europe, and it's been basically emphasized by the Spanish, Venice, the Pope. And that's the reason why they wanted to create in Lecce the center of defense, because they didn't want to have an episode like Otranto again. Luckily, when they got into Otranto, they only stayed, like, a little bit more than one year, and then the Spanish have been able to send them back to Albania. We are very close to Albania. From Otranto to Albania is only 15 nautical miles. So it was very important to be in control of the area, to protect it from this.

Katy

Oh, it's so interesting. So Lecce has been brought up know, it's like the protector of the last line of defense so that you could stop the Ottoman Empire from coming further into, I guess yes

Paolo

Because we are a peripheral area. So even back then, it wasn't that strategically or important to be in control of this unknown peninsula. But if you land in Italy, then from there you can go to Rome or to Naples, which were the capitals, and from Lecce, you basically could stop all the major directions to go to Naples and Rome. So that's the importance of Lecce not only to protect the area itself, but to protect the rest of the country.

Katy

Yeah. Amazing. I think the Romans knew how strategic it was, too. I mean, maybe it doesn't look automatically strategic, but the Romans were there, so they knew a thing or two about strategy.

Paolo

See, for the Romans, if you want to go back to the Romans, the most important place was Brindisi, which is another city a bit north of Lecce and is basically where the Appian Way, this major road from Rome to the Adriatic used to end, and we were out of that. Lecce, during the Roman Empire, was a small place that the Romans used to control, to be in control of the area, but nothing particularly important. So for people that come to Lecce, obviously they also see there's the Roman amphitheater, the Roman theater. There's lots of Roman ruins and Roman influence, but we weren't like, that important, to be honest.

Katy

So what, did they go there just to have fun? It was the entertainment capital.

Paolo

Yeah. I have this feeling that they created this sort of theme park for the locals, so, okay, come to Lecce. Have fun. There's a nice amphitheater. There's a lot of shows so you don't declare a war to us so we can be friends.

Katy

I mean, it's a very beautiful and well preserved both of those sites are very lovely, well preserved Roman sites. And I guess the amphitheater is just right smack bang in the middle of the old town just sitting there. It'd be like the Colosseum.

Paolo

Yeah, because the town, the Baroque town, is basically built over a Roman one. So all the sites like the Amphitheater, the theater, have been discovered recently. Like in the they had to destroy something in order to carve as much as possible out. And obviously it's been restored in a way that you can actually see it but also use it. We had, like not anymore, but in the past, we used to have a lot of concerts down in the Amphitheater. Now it's under restoration, so I don't know if in the future they will use it again as a location for events. But

it's right there, as you said, because it was under the main square. So they had to destroy the original main square to carve out as much as possible of it.

Katy

I think it was worth it. It's amazing. It's an amazing site. But wasn't there a guy doing some renovations on his house and then he made some amazing Roman discoveries in Lecce?

Paolo

Oh, yeah. It belongs to a family called well, the place is called the Faggiano Museum. This family wanted to open a restaurant, and then, if I'm right, they had, like, a problem in one of the bathrooms for some water leakage, something like that. And then they start carving. And the moment they open the floor, they start finding bones, relics, pieces of ceramics. And then they kept carving and carving. They found so many layers going back to an age of pre Roman because of the amount of relics they found and because of also, like a little argument they had with the local bureau that is in charge of controlling this kind of excavation. They basically gave up with the idea of the restaurants and then they left it as a museum. So you go there, they often there, like the family is there. So they tell you the story, the amazing story they had in these findings.

Katy

Yeah, amazing. I imagine that - you will be like, oh! I find it really fascinating in Italy is like, there's just I mean, I'm sure it happens everywhere. Everywhere you dig, you're going to find something. So how do you choose what to protect? It must be a very hard decision to make, I think.

Paolo

Yeah. Like, for instance, if you go there and talk to them, they complain about the fact that a lot of what has been found is now sealed and packed somewhere in a cellar. But we find so many things, like vases. We have millions of vases. Like in a museum, you can't show all of it. You have always to make a selection, and the rest is still important. So it needs to be preserved. But it can't be obviously visible. Not all the time. Otherwise, we like, imagine swords. We found millions of swords of the past. And imagine to go to a museum and start seeing millions of swords, one next to another. I think after the 10th one, he says, okay, what's next? So, yeah, they basically show the most valuable one or the best-preserved ones, and then the rest is saved somewhere safe.

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Katy

It's so interesting. All the history tell us a little bit about what it's obviously, it's a baroque city, but we've got Roman underneath. What other history have we got happening in Lecce?

Paolo

So in terms of Roman times, we've been basically in the middle of this peninsula, so the Romans wanted to be there, and so they have established this place to be in control of the area. But as I said, it wasn't particularly important, like Brindisi was. Instead, the majority of the buildings is from the Baroque age, when, for military and strategic purposes, the Emperor back then wanted to have in Lecce a city with a nice new hospital, new city walls. And then they invited a lot of companies or families from all over, especially Venice, Genoa, a big Jewish community. There were Spanish Albanians all there for business, for trading, basically.

Paolo

And they have left a lot of churches, so many churches. Like, if you love churches, Lecce is your place. There's churches everywhere, but also private buildings owned by important families, again, from all over. And these buildings are decorated in a way that they basically wants to show off. It's like a showcase of families that are challenging each other to always look the best one to make business with.

Katy

Except there's one that's not so good, isn't there? There's a really good story about that one. There's a really fancy palazzi, and then it looks over to one that's a bit wonky or like, a bit different.

Paolo

Yes, the word Baroque basically indicates a pearl when it's not precise. So it's a word that is being used by people in the 1800s to insult this age because they create so many crazy, crooked, elaborate stuff. But the reason is that they wanted to make things basically able to catch your attention. So they noticed that, yeah, perfection works, but not so often. Imperfection instead always works. So, like, if you enter a room full of paintings, if there is one that is a little bit off center, that immediately something that you notice. So there's a lot

of details, a lot of balconies, a lot of buildings that are not precisely aligned, and it's made on purpose to basically catch your attention, to create a surprise effect.

Katy

Well, I guess as human beings, we're not all perfect either, are we? So I think it's like a nice allegory to have that sort of contrast. Who wants to be perfect? I don't.

Paolo

No, me neither. Me neither. I always get noticed because of this imperfect big nose that I have. So I am happy with that.

Katy

He's being very, very harsh on himself. Oh Paolo. So we've been through the walls, we've seen the Roman theater and the amphitheater and gone through the city and the churches. What else is there to see and do in Lecce.

Paolo

So another, I think, curiosity, but also important thing to know is that up until the 90's the old town was totally abandoned, like I remember, I was part of an association we used to perform in the main square of Lecce to kind of tell everybody about the importance of the old town. It was literally in ruins. So imagine the buildings full of lichen. Plants growing all over. There was asphalt everywhere. The square of the cathedral was a place for parking cars. So it was terrible. Instead, starting from the end of the 90s and thanks to the university, I think, but also to so many other projects, they slowly have managed to bring the old town back to life by opening so many nice cafes. There's a lot of nice, interesting shops. Obviously, there is also touristy shops like for souvenirs, but if you get lost in the alleys, you can find very interesting stuff.

Paolo

I think that Lecce is famous, especially for one specific local art, which is a paper mache. There's a lot of craftsmen working on paper mache. If you enter the churches, the majority of the statues are made out of paper mache. And it's amazing because the statues look like wood sometimes, or bronze, marble and in reality, it's just a wooden structure stuffed with straw or cloth and then covered with little pieces of paper, one on top of another. Amazing.

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Katy

Yeah, it's very beautiful and it's very different to the paper machete you do with your children at home. Let's just say when you've got children, you get a balloon and you stick it on - it's not like that. There's workshops you can go and visit. And it's a very beautiful and refined art that gets shipped all around the world, I believe.

Paolo

Yeah, absolutely. The other thing I think that you can feel, at least I feel, is that let's say my dad's generation wasn't really proud of being from southern Italy. In the past, there was some racism between northern Italians and southern Italians. We were considered peasants. And my dad, I remember he felt that a lot. Like, he was always encouraging me not to speak with the local dialect or the local accent. He was encouraging me to go somewhere else. Northern Italy. I'm going to be hard on purpose, like a 'proper Italian'. We were not really proper Italians. Now instead, we feel so proud of ourselves. So for people come in and visit, we're so proud of sharing not only the art, the architecture, but also the way we live, what we like to eat, what we like to drink, how we enjoy to have fun. It's a completely different experience. And I think that Lecce gives you that very strongly because it's kind of the symbol of this Renaissance that we had.

Katy

So it's almost had like a couple of Renaissances. Haven't you had the one, the Baroque one, and now this one in the 90s when everything was restored. And what an amazing I mean, having been there, you can't even imagine, like, this is such a beautiful city. You can't imagine that it was covered in asphalt and abandoned. You can't imagine it because it's so full of life and so full of people wandering around riding their bikes, because there's no cars in there, is there, Paolo? And it's a beautiful city. And one thing I've really noticed about Puglia is the civic pride that people have in their town. Even the Val d'Itria towns, everyone's got their own little way of decorating their town. And, yeah, it's a really beautiful thing to see, because actually, in some places of Italy, you don't see that actually, which is a shame. But you do see that in Puglia.

Paolo

No, no it's really strong. It's not only in Lecce. You're right. It's all over the region, this strength that is moving everybody, because everybody is really so proud. So you go to a

restaurant and everybody is very interested in explaining to you a specific product comes from a farmhouse not so far from there, is made with a traditional way that is only in Puglia. It's beautiful.

Katy

Yeah. And the food in Puglia and Lecce is delicious. And I think it's really fresh and different to northern Italy, to Rome. It's very different. And I really like it because I think it's fresher somehow. You get a bit more vegetables somehow, and you get lots of fresh seafood as well, because so close to the coast and some of the best seafood I've ever eaten, I'm a bit of a seafood fan, I had last year in Puglia. It was delicious.

Paolo

I think it's also due to the environment. I mean, the weather. The weather here tends to be hot, so we don't have rich products or rich recipes such as, I don't know, stuffed pasta, like ravioli, tortellini or Parmigiano very aged cheese. Or know these products that are typical of northern Italy. In southern Italy, especially in Puglia, everything is based on simple ingredients. Obviously, they have to be fresh and good. Otherwise, everything is tasteless. If you get a bruschetta, if you don't use good bread and good tomatoes, you basically doesn't taste anything. So we don't have very complicated and elaborate recipes, but everything is based on fresh things that are always in season. For instance, that's another thing. My mom was ashamed of saying that she couldn't afford to buy meat in the pasta, and so she makes meatball with no meat, with eggplants. Now. She goes around very proud and says, I'm vegetarian. Or like, in the past, we were a little ashamed because we couldn't get, like, exotic fruit. And now instead, we are like a model for the rest of the country because we eat whatever is in season. So extremely fresh, respectful of the environment.

Paolo

So I think that something is changing the world and that's basically brought us light to the area, because we always done this, but somehow now it has a value.

Katy

Yeah, I think it's amazing. I need to try these eggplant meatballs. Eggplant is my favorite. I'm a bit obsessed.

Paolo

I can share the recipe with you.

Katy

All right. I don't think it'll be the same as your mum's, though. Like, I'm just know I might have to come and meet your mum.

Paolo

Especially the eggplant parmigiana. The eggplant parmigiana that my mum's make, obviously is unique.

Katy

The best, I'm sure. The best. So if we're in Lecce and we're going out to a restaurant, what dishes should we try? What should we look for?

Paolo

Okay, the most typical pasta of Lecce is a pasta cooked with chickpeas. It's called Ciceri e tria. Is also very good because some pieces of pasta are deep fried, so they add like a crunchy effect, which is very good. Well, eggplant parmigiana is not typical of Lecce, but it's something definitely, to try. Another typical thing, I think, is something that it's not for everybody. It's called the pignate. It's basically horse meat. Yeah. Slowly cooked in tomato sauce, like, for ages. I love it. We eat snails.

Katy

with garlic or without French style?

Paolo

No. It's a special variety that goes dormant in the soil and gets protected with a veil. So it's brown with a white veil. So we call them the monks. The nuns, actually, because they have the veil. They are cooked with a lot of onion.

Katy

Okay.

Paolo

And olive oil, obviously, and bay leaf and chili pepper. Puglia is famous for Orecchietti, the round pasta in a shape of little ears. We make them together with macaroni, which is a long pasta with a hole in it. And we call them the newlyweds Maritati, because it's the groom and the bride. And it's usually cooked in a very simple way with tomato sauce. Or it's a kind of salty risotto cheese that we grate on pasta. Or there's another ricotta that you can buy in jars that is, like, very pungent because it's like a fermented ricotta. So it's a little bit of it with tomato sauce gives a very nice flavor.

Katy

One of the things I like to try there was the rustico, which I think is a really interesting pastry because it's very different to other pastries that you can get in Italy because using a flaky pastry so very delicious.

Paolo

There's so many rusticos if you travel Italy, so everywhere it's something different because rustic at the end is like rustic. In Lecce is this like, puff pastry with bechamel sauce, mozzarella, tomatoes and black pepper in it. Very rich. But for us, it's almost like a meal because it's really good and goes very well, like in the afternoon with a nice drink.

Paolo

There's another thing that people can easily find is the local bread, which is flat and is made with onion, olives and tomatoes. The olives have the pit left in it to give more flavor. So if you have a try, make sure that you don't break your teeth.

Paolo

And my favorite is because I am a sweet tooth. It's called Pasticciotto. Pasticciotto is a pastry with shortbread pastry with custard inside, aromatized with lemon. I always have it with what's now known as Lecce coffee, which is basically an espresso poured on ice with a little bit of almond syrup instead of sugar. So that's very typical in Lecce.

Katy

It is very typical. You have to try it.

Paolo

But if you want to sound local. If you want to sound local, you should say a coffee on ice with almond syrup.

Katy

Okay. And how do you say that in Italian, please?

Paolo

Very complicated. Caffè con ghiaccio con latte di mandorle.

Katy

It's a mouthful.

Paolo

Exactly. That's why everybody say Coffee Lecce. Much easier.

Katy

Cafe Lecce. Yeah. I mean, it's actually quite refreshing to have that almond syrup in it as well, obviously, with the ice, because it does get quite hot down there, doesn't it? And I know when we were there, it was probably early June, I think. And it was hot. That was last year, which was hot anyway. But it does get hot in the summer months, doesn't it?

Paolo

Yeah, like July and August can be unbearable. This July has been so hot that it was hard even to walk around like over 43 Celsius degrees. So really hot. Instead, now it's around 34, 35. So for us, still doable, but for a lot of people, it can be still too hot. So September starts cooling off October, or if you want to come earlier, since April is nice.

Katy

Yeah, it's lovely. I think it would be lovely then just with all the flowers coming out, it looks spectacular, actually. Very beautiful. So, Paolo, is there anything else we need to know about Lecce? If you were to say one thing, why should we all come to Lecce? Tell us.

Paolo

I think that Lecce is also the best location to explore the entire area because Lecce is very well connected. It's close to both sides. So let's say that you want to come to relax and explore all the beaches. Well, Lecce is a great place because you have like half an hour away - you can go to the Adriatic side or to the Ionian side. We're really strict with that in the sense that if the wind is from the north, we go on one side. If the wind is from the south, we go to the other side. So we have always a very calm sea. We're very strict with that. But also to explore the peninsula.

Katy

So if you go to the beach and there's no one there, you've done it wrong, right? Is that what you're saying?

Paolo

Exactly. But also because we have sandy beaches, but also cliffs. So it's nice to just change places. And then when you're back, you're in Lecce, which is full of restaurants, cafes, bistros, so it's nice to be there.

Paolo

But also the villages, for instance, can go north and in less than an hour you get to Ostuni. So. The Val d'Itria. If you go south you have places like Otranto, which is the most east town. On the east there's Gallipoli on the west part, which is not the Gallipoli of the First World War - that's in Turkey. But it's still a very nice village. There's so many villages inland. For instance, just south of Lecce there is twelve villages where the dialect is actually old Greek. Very fascinating. There's a town called Calimera that in Greek means good morning. There's a town called Castrignano de' Greci - of the Greeks, de Greci.

Paolo

Or there's like a village that I love is called Galatina, where there's a very famous pastry shop from the 1700s still there. Very good. There's a church full of frescoes and is the capital of the local dance which is called Pizzica and is a dance that was basically developed to cure people bitten by spiders. Well, that's what they believed. They believed that spider can cause mental issues or things that now we call with their names like Bulimia, depression, Epilepsy. People back then they had no explanation so they thought the poor spider was the responsible of everything. So their idea was to dance, giving you a rhythm and movement to sweat out the poison. So the person was with a white vest lying down on a blanket and there was a band with four instruments playing and was all about the music and the rhythm to scare away this evil possession. And Galatina has a place, a little chapel dedicated to Saint Paul, which is also the reason why my name is Paolo, where people used to go the day of Saint Paul to celebrate or in the square or inside as a little chapel. It's really interesting. And now it's the folk music that we use for all the events in the summer. There's so many events in the villages where you find stalls, street food and always this kind of music where people are happy to dance because it was also the courting dance for my parents. Let's say.

Katy

Oh, how nice. And I know it's in Puglia and I don't know if it's in a specific area, but they have these beautiful light shows and they light up the towns with beautiful decorations. Is that something that's from this part of the region or is that something special to - I've never seen it before.

Paolo

I haven't done a research so I don't know if it's born somewhere else. But as a matter of fact there's a town south of Lecce called Scorrano where three of the biggest families that create these decorations then they rent to every single village to decorate the streets for a religious event usually are located. And if you ever come around the 7 July, these three families in Scorrano, you can Google like you find it on YouTube, a lot of videos about it. They invite also other companies and they decorate this tiniest village with tons of lights like it's something that it's hard to explain. The streets are not covered just on the side, but also the top is covered with lights. And they turn on the lights with the music. So they do like, shows with lights and music. There's also fireworks involved and works like a showcase for all the customers and then go there, see what's new for the year, and then they rent it for their celebrations. Because when we organize a religious event, there is always a procession, the lights, the fireworks, and a marching band. This is the most important element.

Katy

It's not a festival if those things aren't there. Is that what you're saying? What about the food? There's got to be food, too.

Paolo

Obviously.

Katy

Obviously. I mean, come on, Katy. It goes without saying, but these lights are very I've never seen them. Maybe I've seen them in Sicily. I don't know that I've seen them many other places in Italy, these beautiful lights. But it's a really wonderful thing to see.

Paolo

It's typical of southern Italy, probably like, also the Spanish world, let's say, so whatever was part of the Spanish reign. So I think it's related to that. But it's already like an artwork itself. The wood frames they create which hold up the lights, and it's like panels that they combine together to create like a huge covers for the buildings and the churches. It's really amazing.

Katy

It's very pretty. And I guess what you're saying, though, Paolo, is that if you come to Lecce, you can use Lecce as a base to go and explore some of these different villages and go around the countryside. And it's a really nice place to do that. I think that's a great idea. How long do you think people should stay? I mean, I know you're going to stay forever, but you can't stay forever.

Paolo

It depends on, obviously, how much time you have to spend. At least three days. I would stay in Lecce three to five days. There's so many other villages. We talked about Matera, other places that you can go visit because they have their own beauty. Lecce, it's not only a place with a beautiful architecture, I think it's a place to stay. Staying in Lecce gives you a chance to visit at the right pace, because you have to relax in Lecce. You have to have downtime because we still have siesta in the afternoon. You want to have time to go out in the evening to see what the locals do. So I think that at least three days.

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Katy

Yeah, I could have stayed a lot longer. And what I really loved was I got some beautiful jewelry there. There's some really nice people making really unique and interesting crafts there. So if you want something totally unique in the souvenir department, you're not going to get a magnet with a Colosseum on it. Well, you might get one, but you can get some beautiful earrings or necklace that have been made with some local stone or just with local crafts. Like, really attention to details. There's a lot of beautiful stores in the city that you want to go and have a look around, and pick something up.

Paolo

There is also, like something special in Lecce. The small craftsmen can sign up and be part of this list of craftsmen that are allowed to work along the main street. So by walking around the main street, there's a lot of small craftsmen that work there, so you can see how they produce their little object. And nothing very like gold or other things. They usually work with recycle things like this. But it's beautiful.

Katy

Yeah, that's really lovely. Paolo, thank you so much for sharing beautiful Lecce. I really felt like it was a very peaceful and calm city, so I was interested to hear you kind of describe it that way too. And thanks for sharing your beautiful hometown with us. And I know the Untold Italy listeners would love to stay in touch with you and learn some more. What's the best way for them to do that?

Paolo

They can contact me on Instagram, on Facebook, or write me an email through my website. I'm going to be happy to share with them. I do obviously like guided tours, not only in Lecce, but in the area, so I'm not very good in promoting myself. But yes, at your disposal.

Katy

What's the name of your website Paolo?

Paolo

apuliahandmade.it

Katy

It is amazing. Some friends of mine recently went to Lecce and Matera with Paolo, and they had such a great time, and I know you will too, if you are going there. So you must look him up. Grazie, Paolo. Thank you so much for coming back to Untold Italy. It's always such fun having you here.

Paolo

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Katy

Listeners, Lecce is a very beautiful city and because it takes a little bit of effort to get to you're not going to bump into hordes of other visitors. I was there in June last year and there were so many flowers in bloom and I just loved wandering around the shady streets admiring the elegant architecture and stopping to do some shopping in the city's lovely stores - you'll definitely find a unique souvenir or two in Lecce.

Of course, we visit Lecce on our small group tour of Puglia and Matera so that you can get acquainted with this lovely city for yourself. It's just one stop of our week-long experience exploring the local culture, cuisine and countryside of these beautiful regions. We travel there in Spring and Fall / Autumn so you can enjoy this southern Italian region at its very best. We have a few spots left on our trip in Spring, because our September tour sold out by January this year so we added another date if you're keen to join us in 2024. So if you're intrigued by the wonders of Puglia, come join us.

As always, we've provided the tour information, Paolo's details and all the places mentioned in this episode in our comprehensive show notes at untolditaly.com/194 for episode 194. We provide these notes so you can relax and listen to the episode. Plus it can be tricky trying to jot down Italian names when you're on the go. I'm sure you'll agree.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, our listeners joining us from around the world. If you have a spare moment we would so appreciate it if you left us a 5-star rating and review on your favorite podcast app. That way we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you and raise the profile of our wonderful guests like Paolo who you heard today.

Next week we're talking about the art of trip planning and I have some important things to say but until then it's ciao for now.